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Navy Personnel Research, Studies, and Technology
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research at work

Gathering Ideas Online: Results of the Navy Personnel Command (NPC) Telework Virtual Suggestion Box

Zannette A. Uriell
Rosemary A. Schultz

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Rosemary A. Schultz
Navy Personnel Research, Studies, and Technology

Reviewed by
Paul Rosenfeld, Ph.D.
Director, Institute for Organizational Assessment

Approved and released by
David M. Cashbaugh
Director

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14. ABSTRACT

An electronic suggestion box was created for the Navy Personnel Command to gather ideas of how telework could be encouraged and supported. IdeaScale was used as the platform; participants were allowed to suggest, comment on other suggestions, and vote for suggestions. This annotated brief provides the key themes created through this process.

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suggestion box, telework, web 2.0, social media

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Foreword

The growth in recent years in the use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) for both personal and business/governmental use has led to interest in using these collaborative platforms for research and operational purposes. In 2010, Navy Personnel Research, Studies, and Technology was funded to create a virtual (i.e., online) suggestion box. The Navy Personnel Command (NPC) was asked to serve as the testbed for this relatively new technology that had not, to our knowledge, been used previously in the Navy's manpower and personnel arena. After meeting with the Deputy of NPC, the decision was made to use this social media platform to ask for suggestions for supporting telework at the command, an issue of interest throughout government at that time (the Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 was ratified late in 2010 and required all positions to be evaluated to determine telework eligibility).
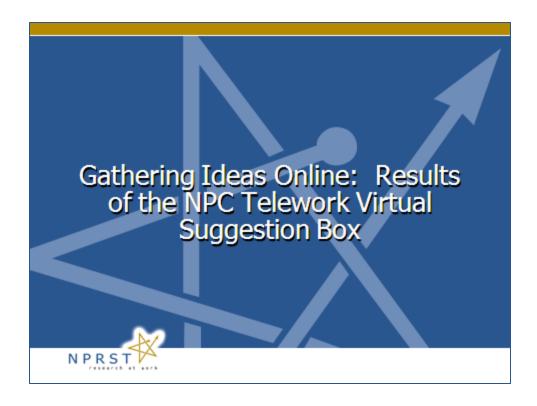
This annotated brief provides the results from that effort, both in terms of telework suggestions as well as lessons learned about how to use web 2.0 technologies such as these in the future.

The authors thank those NPC personnel who visited and participated in the online suggestion box. In addition, the authors would like to thank Ms Andrea Hyneman for her assistance in analysis and Ms Ann Stewart for her support and quick responses to requests.

DAVID M. CASHBAUGH
Director

Table of Contents

Gathering Ideas Online: Results
of the NPC Telework Virtual
Suggestion Box

NPRST
research at work

With the large increases occurring in the use of social media websites (see, for example, Parr, 2010, Rao, 2010), there has been interest in leveraging this type of collaboration for scientific purposes. One potential use is online focus groups, which might allow many geographically-dispersed people to participate in a focus group asynchronously. This annotated brief describes a preliminary test that was undertaken to determine if online focus groups are viable within the Navy. The subject of the focus group discussion was provided by the functional sponsors, leaders of the Navy Personnel Command (NPC), who had an interest in gathering data about teleworking at NPC.

Overview

- Description of suggestion box process

- Results of suggestion box: Supporting telework at NPC
  - Themes of comments
  - Top comments

- Suggestions for similar efforts in future
  - Importance of leadership participation/encouragement
  - Process information and lessons learned
  - Administration suggestions and examples

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This annotated brief is presented in three parts. The first part describes the suggestion box process that was used for this effort, including a brief discussion of why this was used. The second part provides the results relating to supporting telework at NPC, and includes key themes that were found, the comments that received the most votes from participants, and recommendations for NPC based upon the contributions. The last section provides lessons learned about the process and suggestions for conducting future collaborative efforts, of interest to NPRST and the Navy as this type of mechanism is utilized for future work.

This project had two main objectives, one for the functional sponsor, NPC, and one for the performing activity, NPRST. For NPC, the goal was to gather input from NPC personnel on telework, an issue that has divergent views (some managers feel employees need a great deal of oversight for the work to get done while others feel employees need to be left to accomplish the work without having to be micromanaged).

The objective for NPRST was to determine how to conduct a collaborative data gathering effort, specifically to gather lessons learned, determine the resources and skills necessary, and how to analyze the large amount of qualitative data that is gathered.

Virtual Suggestion Box (IdeaScale)

- IdeaScale used by federal agencies as part of the Open Government initiative
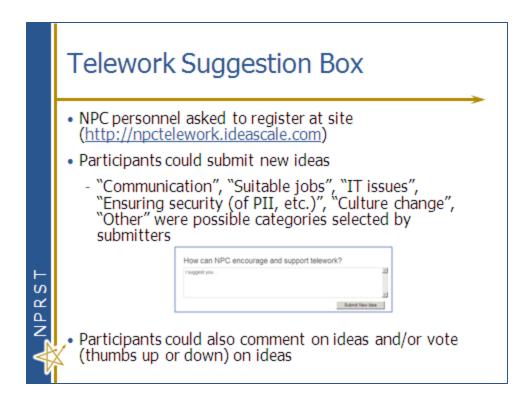- Personnel login to website
  - May select a pseudonym or use their real name/email
- Respondents select an appropriate category for the suggestion
- Passive moderation by two NPRST personnel
  - Comments were available automatically for viewing
  - Moderators browsed suggestions throughout participation period and could edit or remove suggestions if inappropriate

Share Your Ideas!

Have an idea or best practice in public participation that you want to share with open government leaders? Contribute, rate or browse today!

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For this effort, IdeaScale (http://www.ideascale.com) was used. This website was recently part of the Open Government Dialog (http://opengov.ideascale.com/) and had previously been used at a political conference (Huang, 2009). For the NPC iteration, personnel could create a login and could opt to be anonymous or use their real name (see the Appendix for information provided to participants regarding logging in and using the site).

Suggestions could easily be added; participants would create a title, provide a suggestion, and then select an appropriate category from a list based upon common telework implementation concerns (listed on next page).

The suggestion box was passively moderated (i.e., suggestions were posted immediately, and not dependent upon the approval of the moderators) by two NPRST investigators; moderators would only edit or remove if they were inappropriate and violated the rules.

Telework Suggestion Box

- NPC personnel asked to register at site (http://npctelework.ideascale.com)
- Participants could submit new ideas
  - "Communication", "Suitable jobs", "IT issues", "Ensuring security (of PII, etc.)", "Culture change", "Other" were possible categories selected by submitters

  How can NPC encourage and support telework?

  I suggest you ...

  Submit New Idea

- Participants could also comment on ideas and/or vote (thumbs up or down) on ideas

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For this suggestion box, the URL was http://npctelework.ideascale.com . At the bottom of each page were links to the two most pertinent telework policies, CHNAVPERSNOTE 5330 (Chief of Naval Personnel, 2008) and COMNAVPERSCOMINST 5000.1 Article 0100-720 (Commander Navy Personnel Command, 2009).

Six categories (listed above) were created to capture the primary concerns that had been found within the policies and through informal discussion with NPC personnel.

Participants could review any idea, and comment on any idea to perhaps clarify the idea or ask questions. Participants could also submit an "agree" or "disagree" vote for each idea; IdeaScale would then add one for each "agree" and subtract one for each "disagree" vote to determine a total score for each suggestion to determine a "winning" idea based upon net votes.

Timeline

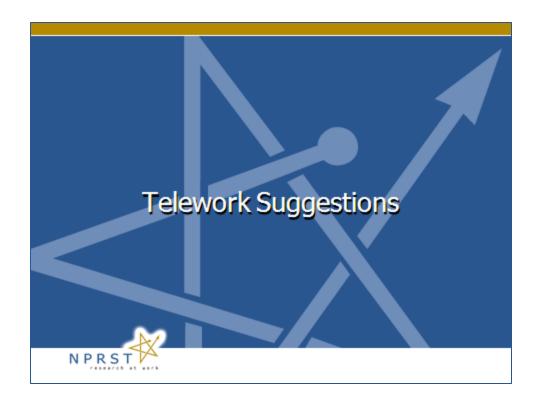| Announcement Type	Date (Time)
POW paragraph (instructions included as attachment)	10/7/2010
Sunshine Meeting discussion	10/7/2010
Email from Ms Stewart	10/12/2010 (1900)
POW paragraph (instructions included as attachment)	10/15/2010
Email from Ms Stewart	10/19/2010 (1312)
"Winner" notified (awarding of prize delayed)	10/21/2010

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This suggestion box was available over a 2 week period in October 2010. On 10/7, an announcement was put into the NPC Plan of the Week (see page 29 for the two announcements, and the Appendix for the attachment that was provided in the POW). In addition, the suggestion box was discussed by the Director of NPRST at the weekly meeting of NPC leadership (the Sunshine Meeting).

After the Columbus Day holiday (October 11), Ms Stewart, the Deputy Commander of Navy Personnel Command) sent an email (see page 30) to all NPC personnel encouraging participation in the effort.

A reminder about the suggestion box was in the POW distributed on 10/15 (see page 29 for text), and a reminder email was sent from Ms Stewart on 10/19. Data were downloaded on the morning of 10/21, and the person with the most popular idea (as determined by votes of those accessing the site) was notified.
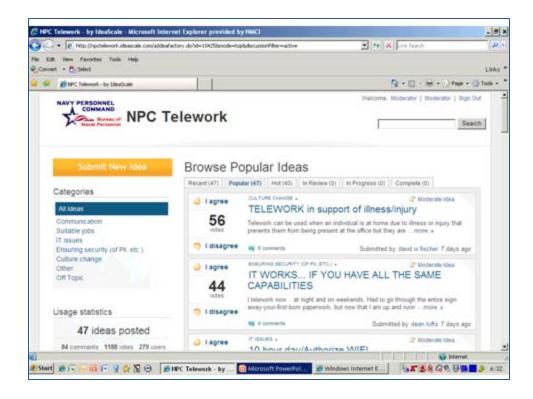
Participant Metadata

Metadata	Count
Number of participants	278
Number of votes	1187
Average number of votes per person	4
Highest number of votes by 1 person	41 (2 people)

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For this suggestion box, 278 people registered, including the 2 moderators. Each voted, on average, 4 times, although two people voted on 41 of the 48 suggestions.

Telework Suggestions

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Public Law 106-346, section 359 (2000) indicated that 25% of the Federal workforce may participate in telecommuting (another term for telework), and in 2001, the Under Secretary of Defense memorandum provided a policy for telework within the Department of Defense (USD, 2001). USD (P&R) released an instruction in 2007 to update the telework policy (USD, 2007). Recently, Congress took additional steps regarding federal telework with the Telework Improvements Act of 2010, which requires all agencies to determine which employees are eligible to telework and must therefore enter into a telework arrangement, where they could telework at least 20 percent of their hours (FederalDaily Staff, 2010).

The next section discusses the suggestions provided by NPC personnel for ways to encourage and support telework at NPC.

Ideas were viewable by participants in several ways, as indicated by the tabs (e.g., "Recent", "Popular") as well as by the categories on the left side. This view shows the most popular ideas at the time.

General Descriptions of Suggestions/Comments

- Generally positive attitudes towards telework
  - Comments against telework were usually responded to with persuasive discussions

- Some comments provided actionable suggestions and others were more "points to ponder"

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Overall, participants had positive attitudes about telework. There were a few suggestions that question the need for telework, but participants responded to those with persuasive discussions (some including links to studies about benefits).

Some suggestions contained actionable ideas (58%) while others were points of discussion or attitudes; when looking at the comments in conjunction with the suggestions, 69% contained actionable ideas.

Content Analysis

- Comments (where available) were added into suggestion to make one block of statements

- Each of the 48 statement blocks was read to determine theme(s)
  - Key themes presented here
  - Additional themes noted to a lesser extent included using lessons learned at other locations, suggested rollout plans, what else the policy should include, costs, and COOP

- Recommendations and actionable suggestions provided

All comment threads were merged into a block of statements. To determine themes of the entire suggestion box, each block was read; one block could cover several themes. Key themes are presented in the following slides, but some additional themes were noted in a few of the blocks. Discussions about lessons learned elsewhere were in 4 of the blocks, suggested rollout plans were in 4 blocks, what the policy should include was included in 3 blocks, use of telework as part of continuity-of-operations (COOP) was included in 3, and costs were discussed in 2.

Key Theme – Computers/Connectivity

- 16 statement blocks related to computers and connectivity

    - "Accessing corporate systems is the largest limiting factor. . .Moving from desktops to laptops would enable access to BuRAS. . .Alternately, opening access to corporate systems to CAC authenticated users would eliminate those barriers without the expense of purchasing NMCI laptops."
    - "Enable the NMCI laptops with WIFI capability ... Limiting remote access to LAN lines only is cumbersome and many locations now only offer WIFI access."
    - "I live in rural [area]...I use dial up at home because I do not want to pay Hughes Nets $100's of dollars. . .it would be extremely unfair to force those of us that do not live in metro Memphis to telework."

The predominant theme, discussed in a third of all statement blocks, related to the use of computers and their connectivity while teleworking. Excerpts of a few of the suggestions are provided here. As can be seen, the comments related to the ability to access key systems, the need for WIFI capability that would work with NMCI laptops, and the problem with gaining high speed connections at homes in rural areas.

Key Theme – Supervisor Buy-in

- 10 statement blocks suggested that supervisor buy-in is needed for a telework program

  - "...Get the supervisors enrolled at least a day a week and mandate some average across a code (say 1 man-day/employee/week) and monitor success. It will work - however - NPC must change the cultural inertia by breaking paradigms."

  - "I think that it should be encouraged and supported by Supervisors. If the Supervisors do not suggest it as a viable alternative, then the employee will be discouraged to even inquire about it. I think the benefits should be touted to Supervisors who in turn could make their employees more comfortable about considering the possibility...."

The second most common theme about how NPC can encourage and support telework related to needing buy-in from supervisors. As seen in the two comments here, the perception is that supervisors are not encouraged or mandated to participate either for themselves or for their employees, perhaps because of a lack of knowledge about the benefits to the supervisor and employee, because of complacency, or because of fear.

Key Themes – Work Plan

- Maintaining supervision and having work plans was mentioned in 9 statement blocks

  - "How about a weekly work plan between supervisor and employee. Keep it in Outlook Tasks and share it with everyone in the work center. Color code the tasks to distinguish what will be done during telework and what will be done at the office. Measure performance against the work plan, not against hours."

  - "For this to work, there needs to be a procedure in place so that everyone understands that this is what will happen if you don't work, when and how the telework option will be rescinded, and have an appeals process so that there is fairness to the decisions made."

  - "Examples like Results Only Work Environment (ROWE) currently being utilized within the OPM (http://www.federalnewsradio.com/?sid=1949981&nid=35) are powerful shifts toward "getting the work done" vs. measuring "time in seat"."

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The third most common theme may actually be related to the previous theme. Nine of the 48 comments discussed the need for work plans that are not related to time on task and that are transparent across the work group. As part of the discussion, several statement blocks mentioned the need for consequences (loss of teleworking privileges) in situations where the employee is found to not be meeting the requirements laid out in their work plan.

Key Themes - Schedules

- 8 statement blocks addressed how often telework should occur, or alternatives to telework that might meet any QoL goals of telework
  - "Telework should be encouraged for two days a week at a maximum."
  - "I think some people could get more work done by working from home than they do in the office. I think it would be a good thing for everyone to HAVE to telework at least one day per week."
  - "I have worked in an organization (National Security Agency/Naval Security Group) where the 4x10 "Flex" schedule was widely used...The productivity of the workforce on "four tens" was high, and there was a notable level of appreciation among employees who had one less day of commuting in the metro DC area."

Scheduling was discussed in eight of the statement blocks. As can be seen in the example suggestions above, scheduling discussion included non-telework options (Four 10-hour days a week) as well as scheduling a telework day every month, every two weeks, or every week.

Key Themes - Communications

- 7 statement blocks addressed communication (non-computer)
  - "If telework is going to work, then the people who are teleworking need to be available, not only by e-mail, but also by phone, to those who are not. If you need a quick answer to a question, a rational person picks up the phone and calls someone."
  - "...nothing beats face-to-face meetings for solving complex problems and building customer rapport such as visiting commands...Teleworking does not replace that. In-person weekly meeting can go a long way in setting the tone and level of work to be accomplished and remain synchronized."
  - "Allowing the ability of a remote access assigned phone number and then the ability to forward to a remote location (House or cell phone) so that business can still be conducted transparent to the telecommute home base."

Several comments addressed the need to maintain communication while teleworking. Participants discussed the importance of using all forms of communication (email, phone, face-to-face), and suggested ways to structure the communication around the telework schedule.

Most Popular Idea

- 64 votes for an idea related to telework in support of illness/injury; 8 votes against

- 6 comments (also addressed in a comment made to another suggestion)

"Telework can be used when an individual is at home due to illness or injury that prevents them from being present at the office but they are able to sit up and work on a computer. Agreement between member and supervisor would have to be worked out, ahead of time if possible (i.e. for surgery), and agreed upon before telework could begin. This would help preserve sick leave for civilians and increase productivity of the office where at least part of the individuals work wouldn't have to be picked up by someone else who is already over tasked. This may require medical approval for a certain number of hours a day the rest would be taken as sick leave for civilians or convalescent leave for military."

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The most popular idea (as voted upon by the participants) was the above idea which related to being able to telework (with doctor's approval) while on sick leave. While this was the most popular idea, there were still votes against it.

This idea was also commented on in the comments made to another suggestion.

Least Popular Idea

- 1 vote for an idea about cost savings and 44 votes against; 2 comments

  "By consolidating workspaces, and sharing of NMCI workstations, we can reduce the cost of IT assets, and "rent" out the space to other base communities"

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The least popular idea was about the cost savings possible with teleworking, assuming enough teleworking occurred that workspaces could be shared by employees.

Recommendations

- Determine and publicize key reason(s) for teleworking at NPC
  - Satisfy Federal requirement, improve QoL, cost-savings, going "green", increasing productivity
- Write a policy that requires some level of participation (e.g., % by division) across NPC, at least one day a month
  - Use lessons learned from other organizations
  - Include how to determine which positions can telework
  - Is not mandatory for any individuals
  - Addresses impact in COOP situations

Several recommendations are offered based upon the suggestions and comments provided by the participants. The first is that the key reason(s) for teleworking at NPC should be determined and then publicized. A number of possible reasons were discussed, including satisfying the legal requirements, improving the quality of life of employees, saving costs (e.g., reduced electrical bills, lower NMCI costs through shared computers), the desire to go "green" (e.g., less driving of employees), increased productivity (e.g., working while quarantined, working during disasters, working while traveling).

The second recommendation to encourage participation is to mandate it within each department and/or division, at least at some level which may be best determined based on the reasons for teleworking.
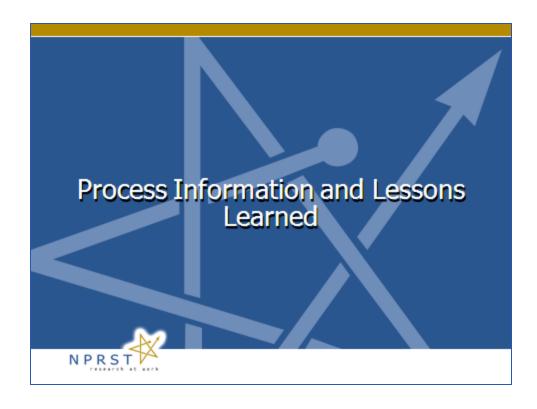
Recommendation (continued)

- Work with NETWARCOM on a WiFi solution

- Determine PII classification and rules
  - What can be accessed
  - How it can be accessed (NMCI laptop vs CAC-authentication)
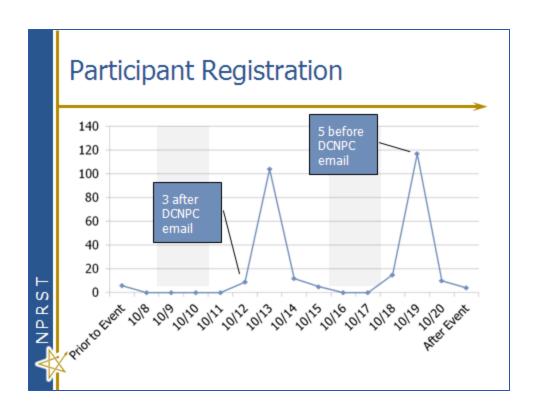 - Ensure it can be accessed

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As several comments indicated, hard-wired Internet lines are becoming scarce with many locations (hotels, fast food, airports, etc) preferring WIFI. It may be appropriate to work with NETWARCOM on determining how to utilize WIFI on NMCI laptops where WIFI is currently prohibited.

The last recommendation based upon the suggestions and comments is to determine PII classification rules. For example, if a certain database with PII must be used by an employee while teleworking, determine what level of security is required (NMCI laptop, CAC-enabled home computer, etc).

Process Information and Lessons Learned

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In addition to the suggestions, comments, and votes within the virtual suggestion box, a number of things were learned about the process that would be useful to NPRST and other organizations in similar future efforts.
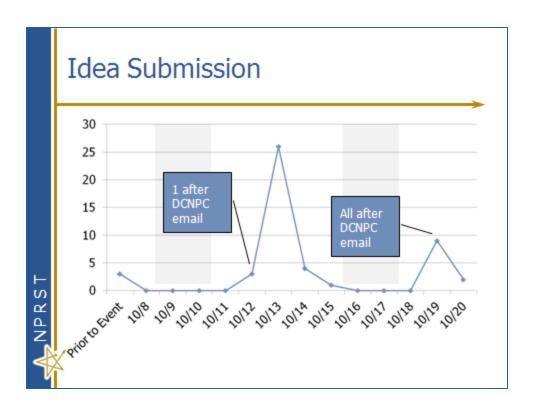
The graph above shows the number of registrations for each of the days that the suggestion box was open. The registration rate was clearly impacted by the two emails DCNPC sent out; the late email from her on 10/12 led to over 100 registrations on the following day, and the mid-day email on 10/19 led to almost 115 registrations that afternoon.
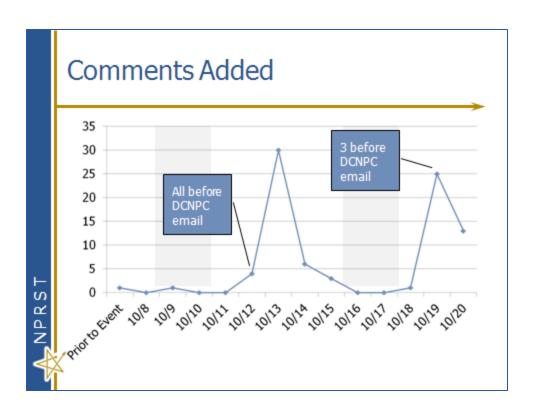
Perhaps not surprisingly, no registrations occurred on the two weekends nor on the Federal holiday (10/11).

Idea Metadata

Metadata	Count
Number of ideas	48
Communication	26
Culture Change	9
Other	6
Suitable jobs	4
IT issues	2
Ensuring security	1
Number of comments	84
Largest number of comments for one idea	9
Most votes for an idea	64
Most votes against an idea	44
Most net votes	72

By the time the suggestion box closed, 48 ideas had been contributed, in the self-selected categories listed above. There were 84 comments across the 48 ideas; later suggestions possibly received no comments due to the finite nature of this suggestion box. One idea had 72 votes (including both the votes for and against) while some had no votes (again, possibly due to the suggestion being provided shortly before the suggestion box closed).

This graph provides the pattern of suggestion submissions. As with the participant registrations, the submission of ideas was sensitive to the emails from DCNPC. However, the suggestions actually were higher after the first email than after the second, which is opposite of the participant registrations. Again, no suggestions were made over the weekends or on the Federal holiday.

As with the registrations and suggestions, the comments were most likely to be made immediately following DCNPC's emails.

Lessons Learned

- Need a generic email account for help, etc.
- Be sure respondents know that only one idea should be submitted at a time
- Be sure respondents know ideas may move if determined to fit in a different category
- Provide "seed ideas," or example suggestions that help participants frame the discussion and encourage response
- Consider a period for submission and a period for voting, so that last submissions also have an opportunity to receive votes

The suggestion box that was used at NPC provided useful information regarding teleworking at the command. This process could be implemented elsewhere within the Navy, perhaps as a general suggestion box across the Navy or at specific commands, or targeted to specific groups (for example medical providers and psychologists when asking for ways to better identify those who might have mental health issues).

A few lessons were learned through the NPC suggestion box that would be beneficial in any future efforts to have an electronic suggestion box. Some of those, listed here, are more concrete and should be implemented while others (next page) are possibilities to consider to expand the suggestion box.

When comments were made in the suggestion box, a notification was sent to the original suggestor. Those emails indicated one of the moderators as the sender, which lead to discussions between the moderators and the suggestors through email instead of collaboration within the tool. To avoid this, future tools should use a generic email account to make it more obvious that the system is emailing and not the moderator.

Some suggestions covered a range of topics. Additional guidelines distributed to the participant before or on the tool itself should indicate that one topic per suggestion.

When reading all of the suggestions, the moderator may find a more appropriate category than that original used by the contributor. Participants should be informed that their ideas may be moved. One contribution in this suggestion box was deemed off topic and annotated as such by the moderators.

"Seed ideas" should be included in a suggestion box to provide contributors an idea of what they should look like and how they should be phrased to maximize the collaboration.

As indicated previously, suggestions provided at the end of the time period likely did not have an opportunity to gain votes or to be commented/improved upon simply because they were contributed late in the 2 week window. Future efforts should consider a period for suggestions/comments and a separate period devoted to voting.

Additional Points for Future

- Be sure to know objective of similar efforts
  - Determines size, timeline, etc.
- Use "game mechanics" to help encourage participation
  - Badges for participation, ongoing competitions, etc
- Consider not having anonymous option
- Be clear what types of ideas are of interest
- Have a transparent process ("That's why wooden suggestion boxes never work")
- Help participants moderate their own work (i.e., look for duplicates prior to submission)

Based upon conversations with commercial experts that have occurred since the analysis, some other points should be considered for future efforts. First, be sure the objective is known before determining anything more in the effort, i.e., what is the real issue being investigated. This will determine who should be included (e.g., customers versus employees) and when it should be done (e.g., after a major marketing campaign, after the busy sales time), as well as the seed ideas and the best techniques to publicize the effort.
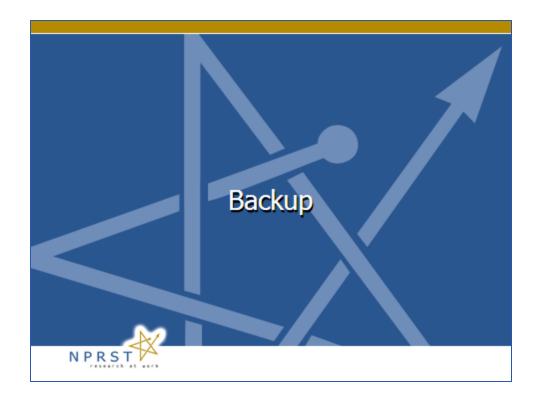
"Game mechanics" should be used. IdeaScale did include some of this (points for participation, badges, etc) but were not actively used for this effort. However, creating more of a competitive and rewarding experience can encourage participation if incentives are not an option.

Anonymity is an option within the tool, but it may be more helpful in a collaborative environment to require each person to be clearly identified. In this virtual suggestion box, few chose anonymity.
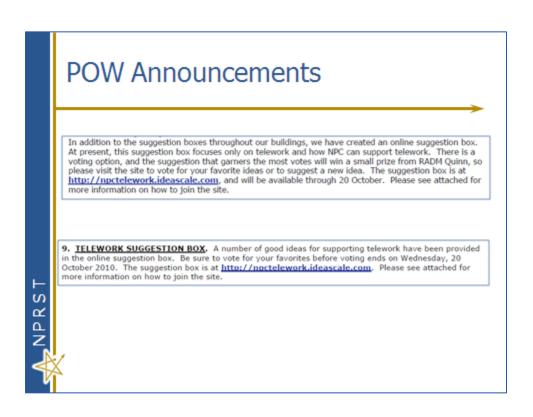
Be clear about what types of ideas are of interest. For example, if only actionable suggestions are needed, be sure that is clear to participants.
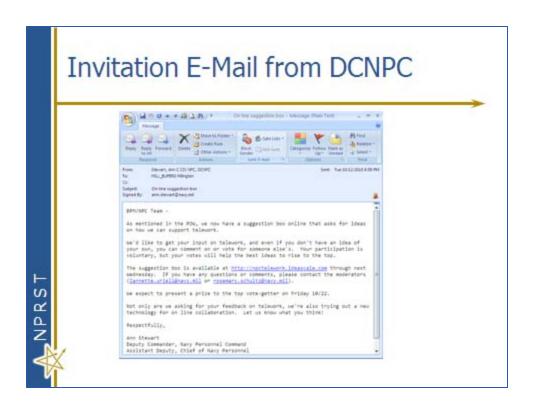
For suggestion boxes, be sure the process is transparent. Explain why a suggestion has not been accepted so that the contributor (and those who are also participating) knows how to improve future suggestions.
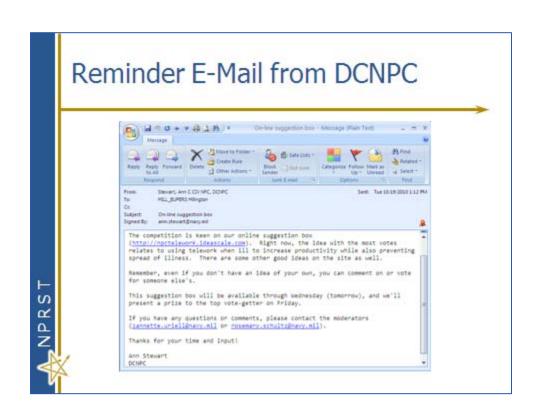
Have the participants help the moderators by providing a sampling of suggestions so that the contributor can be sure their contribution is not a duplicate of another.

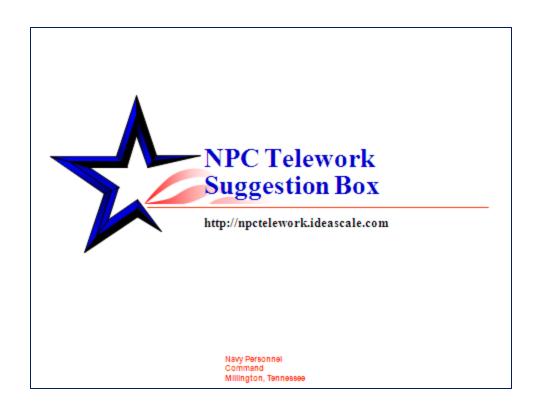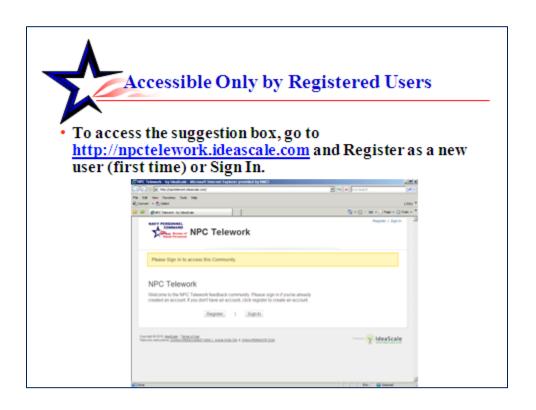The following pages provide the Plan of the Week (POW) announcements as well as the two emails from DCNPC.

POW Announcements

In addition to the suggestion boxes throughout our buildings, we have created an online suggestion box. At present, this suggestion box focuses only on telework and how NPC can support telework. There is a voting option, and the suggestion that garners the most votes will win a small prize from RADM Quinn, so please visit the site to vote for your favorite ideas or to suggest a new idea. The suggestion box is at http://npctelework.ideascale.com, and will be available through 20 October. Please see attached for more information on how to join the site.

9. **TELEWORK SUGGESTION BOX.** A number of good ideas for supporting telework have been provided in the online suggestion box. Be sure to vote for your favorites before voting ends on Wednesday, 20 October 2010. The suggestion box is at http://npctelework.ideascale.com. Please see attached for more information on how to join the site.

Invitation E-Mail from DCNPC
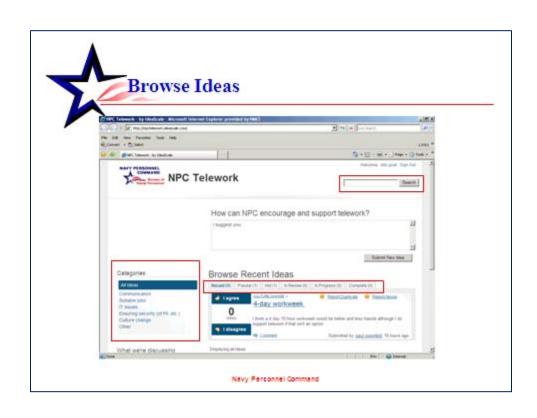

Reminder E-Mail from DCNPC

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Commander, Navy Personnel Command. (2009). *Telework* (COMNAVPERSCOMINST 5000.1 Article 0100-720 ch-1). Millington, TN: Author.

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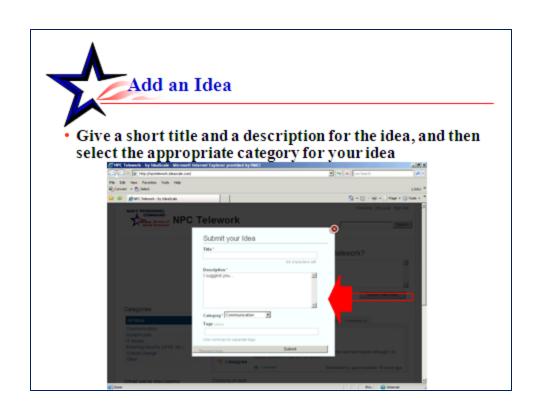Under Secretary of Defense. (2007). *Telework Policy* (DoD Instruction 1035.01). Washington, DC: Author.

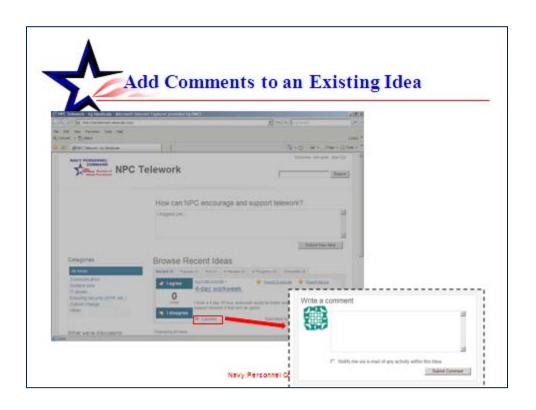# Appendix A:
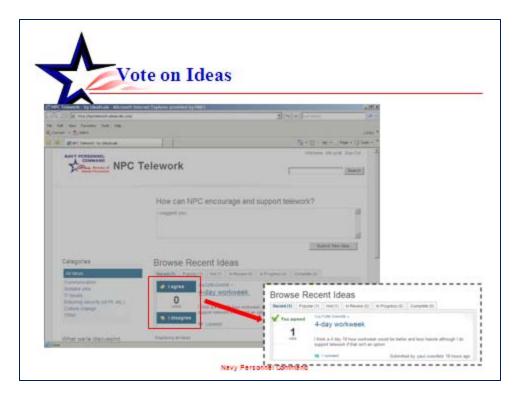## NPC Telework Suggestion Box

Rules for Online Suggestion Box

- Rule 1: Treat others as you want to be treated. Do NOT post anything that might be considered illegal, obscene, threatening, profane, vulgar, lewd or otherwise objectionable, including anything that might involve racism, sexism, or any other –ism. If you find it impossible not to swear, please use cleaner alternatives, such as "effing", "sugar", or asterisks (s***).

- Rule 2: Respect other people's time, input, and bandwidth. Post comments that are appropriate to the discussion of telework. Use descriptive subject lines, and make your responses meaningful and complete (i.e., agree or disagree but explain why).

- Rule 3: Make yourself look good online, but think OPSEC. Do NOT post anything that is For Official Use Only (FOUO), classified, PII, etc. Although we will review all comments posted on the site, there will be time delays for that review; if you find information that might be too compromising of a person or of operational security, send an email; we retain the right (but not the obligation) to review and/or remove any content posted.

- Rule 4: You are ultimately responsible for your comments. You participate at your own risk, taking personal responsibility for your comments, your username, and any information provided.

- Rule 5: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes. When someone makes what you would consider to be a mistake (e.g., incorrect information, spelling mistakes, an overly wordy answer, etc.), remember rule 1 above and respond in a manner that wouldn't offend you if you had been the person to make the mistake. If you feel an error is so serious that NPRST should correct it, send an email; we retain the right (but not the obligation) to review, screen, delete, edit and/or remove any content posted.

- For further information visit the DoD user agreement at:
  http://www.ourmilitary.mil/user_agreement.shtml

Navy Personnel Command

Questions?

- NPRST (BUPERS-1) is managing this effort

- For questions or comments about the suggestion box itself and/or the process, please contact:

  - Zannette Uriell (zannette.uriell@navy.mil) – Moderator

  - Rosemary Schultz (rosemary.schultz@navy.mil) – Moderator

  - Paul Rosenfeld (paul.rosenfeld@navy.mil)

Navy Personnel Command

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